



DYING FOR A HOLIDAY

Why are so many young
British tourists falling
to their deaths?

Are the all-you-
can-drink party
packages to blame?

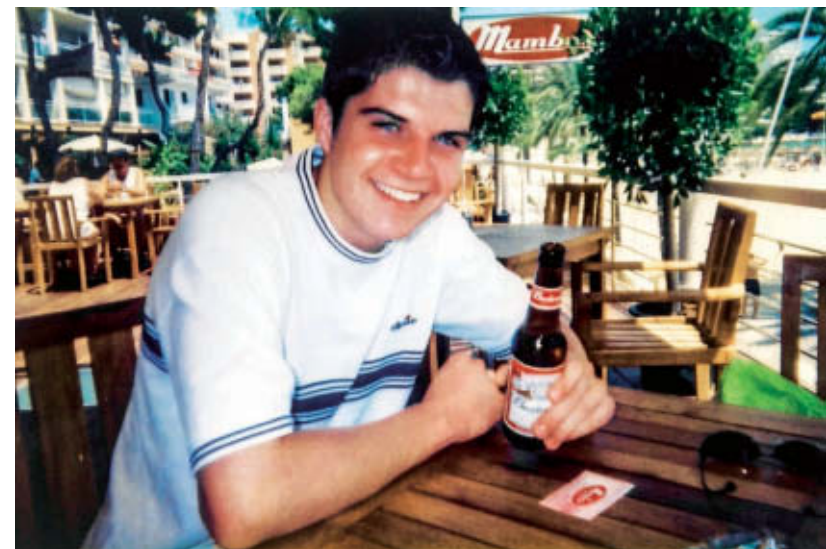
Katie Glass travels to the
resorts and meets the families
desperate for answers

The poolside bar opens at 11am, signalled by an eruption of music, and the BH Mallorca hotel, the epicentre of holiday hedonism in Magaluf, blinks to life. On balconies littered with last night's debris, girls in acid-bright bikinis and groggy boys who look as though they've barely left school start to emerge. From now until night, the all-inclusive drink flows. At pool parties with limitless alcohol, girls down cocktails and dance to Beyoncé, as lads with reddening six packs high-five over beers. One boy, dressed as a mermaid, passes out on a sunlounger near the stage where DJs play and former Love Island contestants parade in swimwear to launch their after-show careers.

As evening falls, these balconies become disco boxes. Sounds clash in air ripe with Lynx. Grime meets Come on Eileen, football chants compete with shouted pop lyrics, punctuated by smashed glass and screams. On one balcony, two lads lean over the railings and pour beer on unsuspecting passers-by. I watch them over my balustrade, where a sign reads: "Balconies are the main cause of death and accidents on holidays."

In 2016, Alexander Forrest, a 20-year-old Scottish charity worker on holiday with friends, fell to his death from his third-floor balcony at this hotel. In May this year, another young man, thought to be 25, fell from another third-floor balcony. His friends tried to grab him as he dropped. He survived, but suffered serious injuries. A month later, a 22-year-old man fell from a balcony on the floor below, breaking a leg and his jaw and losing several teeth.

This year, tens of thousands of British teenagers will embark on package holidays. Tour companies such as Thomas Cook promise them #legendaryholidays, with the motto "Go hard or go home". So far this season, there have been reports of 16 British people falling from balconies abroad. Eight have died from their injuries.



SPANISH POLICE HADN'T INTERVIEWED GETHIN'S FRIENDS OR STAFF AT THE HOTEL. NO INQUIRIES WERE MADE INTO THE STRUCTURE OF THE BALCONY

In June, Conor Morgan, a 19-year-old from Ireland, was found dead after falling from a hotel balcony at the party resort of Aiya Napa, in Cyprus. He had arrived on the island only hours before. The exact circumstances of his death are not yet known. As I write, Tolga Aramaz, a 23-year-old Labour councillor from north London, lies in an intensive-care ward, critically injured after falling from a second-floor balcony in Ibiza.

I began to monitor the growing number of British people dying from balcony falls abroad in 2012, following the inquest into the death of Gethin Williams, an 18-year-old from north Wales. Williams had died nearly a decade earlier, in 2002, at a hotel in the same location as BH Mallorca, then called Fiesta Jungla. He had been one of a group of 15 teenagers from Ysgol Tryfan school, in Bangor, who had been celebrating the end of their A-levels. After a night out, he tried to climb into his room via the balcony, slipped and fell.

In 2013, I saw reports of 12 fatal balcony falls. Seven in 2014. Six in 2015. Ten in 2016. Nine in 2017. This year, I watched horrified as the season began, noticing again that, in most cases, the deaths involved young people, alcohol and package holidays.

Each fall haunted me. These were groups of friends going abroad on their first holidays together. Young people, on the cusp of adulthood, testing boundaries; allowed their first taste of freedom by anxious parents. A modern rite of passage, both scary and exciting, echoed across cultures. In Australia, Aborigines have their walkabout. In America, students go on spring break. For the Amish, it is called rumspringa, from the German verb *springen*, literally meaning "to jump".

Williams grew up on a farm on the outskirts of Bangor, near the mountains of Snowdonia, a world away from the vibrant chaos of Magaluf. It is so quiet here, you can hear the wind in the grass, sweeping up the field past the church where Gethin's ashes are buried.

"It's very, very vivid," Nerys Williams says of the day she learnt her son had died. It was early morning. Her husband, Emrys, and their older son, Dafydd, were in the fields milking the cows, so Nerys was alone when she opened the door to two police officers, faces drawn and pale. "They said, Gethin... Oh..." She starts to cry, the pain still fresh, "...and I knew."

Sixteen years have passed, but Gethin's parents still speak of his death in broken sentences and cracked voices. They describe how two John Deere tractors accompanied the hearse to their son's funeral at Bangor Cathedral. How so many people came that they had to stand in the aisles and out into the grounds. How the choir their boy once sang for had left a gap where he would have stood. For a long time after, Emrys says, he was "sort of looking down on myself".

From a "memory box" crammed with press cuttings and photographs, Nerys finds a picture of Gethin on his last day. He is drinking beer in the sun, in front of a sign that says "Mambo". "That's what he called me," she

says, recalling how, days after his death, the teenagers he'd been away with came to their house. "A big wall of lads coming towards us and you're thinking, 'Oh yes, they're all here... but there's one missing.'" She whispers: "I wonder what he'd be like now."

Nerys wrote to me before I visited. She told me her son's death was "cruel" and "haunting". Other parents who had lost children in balcony falls also wrote. Their letters saturated with grief. Some told me their loss was too painful to speak about. "Every single day is a struggle for us," one father wrote. Their letters shared another anguish — reports of their child's death often focused on the fact that they'd been consuming alcohol. "Please be sympathetic," one family wrote.

The Association of British Travel Agents (Abta), which represents about 1,200 companies including Thomas Cook and Tui, runs an annual campaign highlighting the danger of balcony falls. "Booze and balconies don't mix," their poster warns. "Dozens of holidaymakers die or are severely injured every year. Take extra care on balconies after drinking alcohol as your judgment may be affected."

Immediately after Gethin's death, it was wrongly reported that he had been trying to escape over his balcony as the result of a prank played by his friends. Reports focused on how he'd found success starring in a Welsh soap opera.

"When we say he was an actor, a lot of people assume he was loud and drank a lot," Emrys says. In truth, Gethin was "shy", "sensible", "mature". He rarely drank or went out. He was happiest driving his quad bike over the mountains, chatting to octogenarian sheep farmers. "You do tend to close your eyes and hope for the best when they go away," Nerys says. But she trusted Gethin: "He was sensible." Before the holiday, he had been reluctant to go. "We told him, 'It's only a week,'" Emrys says. "A week is a lifetime," Nerys adds.

Eighteen-year-old Emma Jones walked back with Gethin from a nightclub to their hotel. When he couldn't find his keys, she offered to let him stay in her room. He declined. "He was a gentleman," Emrys says. Emma later told Gethin's parents how she had turned to go back to her room when she heard the bang.

I ask a lot of questions to which the Williamses have no answers. They waited nine years for Gethin's inquest, delayed because of a lack of information from the Spanish authorities. To wait so long was "cruel", Nerys says. The inquest offered little information. Spanish police hadn't interviewed Gethin's friends, guests or staff at the hotel. No inquiries were made into the structure of the balcony. "It was quite obvious," says Nerys, "that the coroner was going to blame it on alcohol." Emma's words were the only testimony to Gethin's last moments. At the inquest, when asked if she thought Gethin might not have attempted to climb from the passageway onto the balcony if he had been sober, she agreed. In a later interview, she said that he

"JUST BECAUSE YOU'VE CONSUMED ALCOHOL, YOU DON'T FORFEIT YOUR RIGHT TO JUSTICE. YOU STILL DESERVE THE SUPPORT OF THE FOREIGN OFFICE"

wasn't "completely drunk". At the inquest, no proof was offered, and it emerged that no toxicology tests were done. "I'm not saying that he didn't drink while he was there. He drank, but not to excess," Nerys says. "He wouldn't have drunk so much that he didn't know what he was doing."

Gethin's parents assumed British police would follow up with the consulate, that there would be an investigation by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). "Nothing happened," Nerys says. "We had no help." They are tormented by Gethin's last moments. They believe if their son had died in the UK, his death would at least have been investigated. "We'll never know exactly what happened," says Nerys. "We'll never have closure."

Six months after Gethin's death, the tour operator Thomson flew his parents to Mallorca. Nerys wanted to see where he had been "in his last seconds. I wanted to know why." While they were there, a newspaper reported another balcony death.

Dorian Gamble is 6ft 4in, his large muscular arms covered with tattoos. But when he cries, he rocks like a child. He takes a breath as he pinches his icy blue eyes. "I can control it now," he says. "Before it would be every five minutes. A song would come on, a memory, someone you see with the same eyes as your son, the same goofy laugh, and it will take you straight back. Any parent who's lost a child would understand. It's been five years and you think about them every day."

There were 13 close friends, all in their twenties, "all good-looking lads" staying at the Christabelle Hotel Apartments complex in Ayia Napa with Thomas Cook. On July 27, 2013, three days into his holiday, Dorian's eldest son, Kona, tweeted: "Last night. One of the best nights of my life." Days later, the 21-year-old was dead. It was about 2am when Kona's younger brother, Colm, phoned to say there had been an accident. In the background, someone was crying. The surgeon at Nicosia Hospital told Dorian to come immediately. "That's when I started panicking."

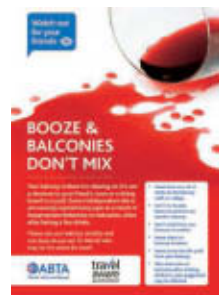
Kona was popular, funny and kind. "A boy's boy," Dorian says. He'd just passed his electrician's qualifications and found a job with a local firm in Leicester, which had given him his own van. His father remembers how they stood on the bottom stair, hugging before he left. His arms were bare then. Now he shows me his tattoos: pictures of Kona through the years, copies of scribbles he drew as a kid and handwritten messages from Father's Day cards transposed onto his skin. "It's a way of keeping him close."

Kona had been out drinking in Ayia Napa with his friends. The hotel's CCTV shows him dancing towards his room at 3.30am. It seems, having forgotten his key, he then tried to climb into his room on the second floor from above, via the balcony. His friends found him ➤➤➤



Conor Morgan (top) and Alexander Forrest (above) both fell to their deaths at European resorts

A campaign by the travel association Abta warns against drunken behaviour on hotel balconies



later that morning. They came back to their room to find him hanging upside down, his left leg trapped in an air-conditioning unit on the balcony, blood coming from his ears, nose and mouth.

Dorian had never been abroad before. He drove to the passport office in Peterborough first thing the next morning. The young man processing his forms cried. Dorian cries now too, remembering how he then drove to Heathrow and flew overnight to Cyprus with his brother and Colm.

Kona was in the critical ward, his lips dry, legs swollen, fingernails black. The left side of his head was cut open to allow for his swelling brain. His chest was rising and falling, breathing through a life-support machine.

“When I saw him, I knew he was gone. You want to say, ‘Wake up, wake up!’” The tears start to fall again. If the FCO did anything, Dorian did not register its impact. Thomas Cook did not organise Dorian’s trip. The flights cost him £2,000, which he had to put on his credit card. He slept on the floor at the hospital and on waiting-room chairs. Kona had not taken out travel insurance and Dorian did not have the €4,000 necessary to bring his son’s body home. To cover the cost, friends and family chipped in and the firm Kona had just started working for sold his new van.

Even in cases where the victim has had travel insurance, some companies have refused to pay out where drinking was involved. There are several GoFundMe pages online that have been set up to bring bodies home. One is raising funds for the repatriation of 20-year-old Tom Hughes, from Wrexham, north Wales, who died falling 65ft from a walkway at an apartment complex in Magaluf in June.

From the hospital in Nicosia, Dorian went to the scene of Kona’s accident. “You couldn’t tell what had

happened because they’d cleaned it all up,” he says. The only evidence was the twisted air-conditioning unit.

The inquest by the Cypriot authorities took almost four years. It was adjourned 12 times. Apparently Kona had tried to climb to his balcony from the roof. The cause of death was recorded as head and brain injury caused by falling from a height.

Dorian felt the inquest was “shabby” and “rushed”. The police did not interview — or even identify — everyone at the hotel. He claims no photographs were taken at the scene. “It’s a holiday resort, so they don’t want to make a big thing of it,” Dorian says. “Over there, it’s washed away, literally. It’s just someone who’s had a drink and he’s dead. Don’t worry, we’ve got another 20,000 coming. Let’s wipe all the blood up because we’ve got someone staying in that room next week.”

If a Cypriot national died in such circumstances in Britain, it would be investigated, Dorian says. He is right. The British inquest into Kona’s death started last year and is still going on. Interpol is now involved.

“Just because you’ve consumed alcohol, you don’t forfeit your right to justice,” says the MP Hannah Bardell, who has established an all-party parliamentary group to investigate the “often poor” consular support received by families who lose someone abroad. “People still deserve the full support of the Foreign Office and a full investigation into the manner of their death.” She wants the FCO to provide bereaved families with consistent support: a specific point of contact, translation services and help with repatriation.

Bardell also wants the FCO to ensure foreign authorities carry out proper investigations into the deaths of British nationals. She is concerned that, especially in Spain, local authorities “too often want to present alcohol as an explanation and use it as a reason for failing to investigate fully”.

She is currently supporting the family of Kirsty Maxwell, 27, who died falling from a 10th-floor balcony in Benidorm last April while on holiday with friends. Maxwell died in unexplained, suspicious circumstances, but the failure of Spanish police to interview key witnesses, take DNA samples or initiate major crime scene protocols means vital evidence has been lost. “The FCO must hold foreign authorities not necessarily to our standards, but to the standards of their own judicial system,” Bardell says.

Failure to hold proper inquests has deprived parents of emotional closure, authorities of understanding and companies of any impetus for change. Simple measures such as safety wires, glass panels, better training for travel reps, or keys issued as wristbands (as is now the case at the BH Mallorca) could be life-saving.

Abta claims balcony incidents “usually involve alcohol”. Its posters focus on “inappropriate behaviour after a few drinks”. The association’s director of brand and business development, Victoria Bacon, told me: “It is primarily about behaviour.”

When I asked Abta for statistics on the cause of balcony incidents or how many involve alcohol consumption, it had none. Abta noted that currently no international body collects this data. I asked Bacon how Abta knows that most balcony incidents are linked to alcohol: “Could you say, is there an assumption based on the demographic of the people we’re talking about? Yes, there probably is.”

Undoubtedly, it is in tour companies’ interests to suggest that balcony accidents result from bad behaviour and drinking, rather than other contributory causes, such as health and safety issues or staffing problems, unattended reception desks or the failure of hotel staff to give vulnerable guests access to their rooms. Philip Banks, a solicitor at Irwin Mitchell, which has the largest international personal injury department in England, notes that “a tour operator who has organised a package holiday is potentially responsible for any deficiency in the hotel system or a defect in the balcony. If there is a failure in the performance of any component of the package holiday, then an injured client can bring a claim against the tour operator in the UK courts.”

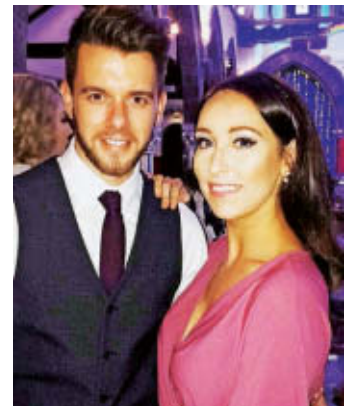
Rob Weir QC is representing Philip Clay, who fractured his skull falling 20ft from a balcony in Tenerife in 2011. Clay, who had been drinking, fell while climbing from his balcony after he became trapped outside when the door broke. Weir says: “If someone engages in a manoeuvre for a good reason, as a result of something the defendant should have done, there may be culpability.”

One family I spoke to pointed out their son hadn’t been involved in “reckless behaviour”, but was outside “simply taking some air”. Benjamin Harper, 28, a safety-conscious roofer from Twickenham, southwest London, fell from a fifth-floor hotel balcony in Magaluf in 2012, after stepping outside for a cigarette. Another grieving family worried that “undermanned” resorts on the Costa Brava were “ageing badly”, with crumbling buildings and rickety, low balcony railings. “It’s easier to blame alcohol for the problems,” they said. Yet another family told me their son fell while trying to climb into his room after his key card didn’t work. There was no one at the reception to let him in.

In the rush to blame irresponsible behaviour, a proper account of why so many balcony falls occur has not taken place. If alcohol is indeed to blame, perhaps travel companies should take some responsibility for the drinking culture they promote.

“Gethin didn’t drink to excess, but his death is definitely down to the culture of drinking,” Emrys says, “They allow drinking on an industrial scale. It’s big business. And big business doesn’t mind if two or three people die in a week.” One father whose teenage son died in a balcony fall told me: “Bar staff and authorities

“BAR STAFF AND AUTHORITIES ENCOURAGE BINGE DRINKING, BUT THEY ARE NOT WILLING TO DEAL WITH THE CONSEQUENCES”



actually encourage binge drinking, but they are not willing to deal with the consequences.”

Many shopkeepers and restaurant owners in Magaluf told me they blame the deaths on the all-inclusive deals at hotels, where unlimited alcohol is served. One hotelier claimed some tour companies insist in their contracts that hotels include alcohol in their all-inclusive deals. The director general of tourism for the Balearic Islands, Antoni Sanso, told me he had also heard this. He is now exploring ways to stop Mallorcan hotels from offering all-inclusive deals.

I asked Abta’s Victoria Bacon if tour companies should do more to police alcohol consumption on package holidays. “I don’t think it’s a tour operator’s job to police people,” she said. “It’s certainly their job to support them... policing is a strong word.” I told her it was the word Dorian had used.

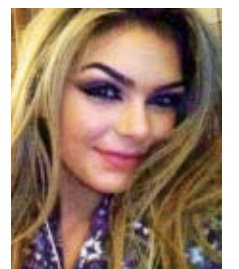
“Someone should stop them,” he said. “Someone should say, ‘Haven’t you had enough to drink tonight, mate?’ It should be policed a lot better.”

In Magaluf, the party goes on. On the neon mecca of the Punta Bellena strip, teens with glittery faces and bare chests wobble clutching cans. From here it is a short walk to the peach-pink Eden Roc apartments, where in the past few months 19-year-old Natalie Cormack, 20-year-old Tom Hughes and 18-year-old Thomas Channon fell to their deaths. The security gates were open when I visited. It was still easy to access the walkway from where they fell. Thomas Channon’s father has called the failure to take measures an insult to his son’s memory.

On the strip, I watch giggling school-leavers necking sambuca shots in bars serving “fishbowl” cocktails. I pass advertisements for foam parties with all-inclusive booze and the Sorry Mom Tattoo parlour. It is a screaming, chaotic, joyful playground catering to infantile tastes, but then, as Nerys says, most of the people who come here “are still children, really”. On the cusp of adulthood, they reveal how fragile they still are ■

Additional research by Robbie Harb

UNEXPLAINED
Kirsty Maxwell, pictured with her husband, Adam, was on a hen do in Benidorm when she fell from an apartment block (left) in 2017



FATAL FALL
Natalie Cormack, 19, is one of three Brits to die at Eden Roc apartments in Magaluf this year



Dorian Gamble (right) believes the death of his son Kona (above) was not properly investigated



“IT’S A RESORT ... SOMEONE’S HAD A DRINK AND HE’S DEAD. LET’S WIPE THE BLOOD UP, WE’VE GOT SOMEONE ELSE IN THAT ROOM NEXT WEEK”

LEFT: CHRISTOPHER NUIN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE; RAYMOND PRESS; RIGHT: ENTERPRISE NEWS AND PICTURES; PA; PIXELBOO